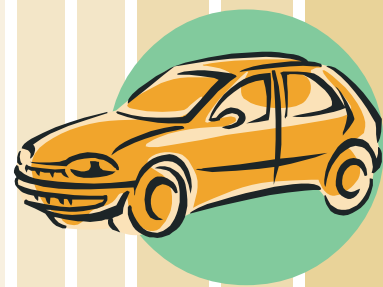


Automotive Maintenance



consumer**brief**

Traveling by car can be one of the best ways to see New Jersey. However, car failure can spoil the best of plans. When you are traveling outside of New Jersey, you will find that most of the gas stations are self-service, so you will need to know how to check routine maintenance items yourself.

Be sure that you know how to check your oil and always carry a rag for wiping the dip-stick clean. In addition, be sure that you also know how to check coolant levels and the battery. Even checking your windshield wiper fluid is important, as is replacing worn wiper blades. At regular intervals inspect your vehicle's belts and hoses, check tire pressure, and make sure that you also clean the windshield and headlights.

BUYING GAS

Fill your gas tank before it is close to being empty. You will have a better selection of stations and prices. This is also important in the winter because a full tank helps to prevent gas-line freeze. Always check the station's pump before filling your tank to be sure the gallon and price gauge are set at zero and that you are receiving the grade of gasoline you requested. If you ask an attendant to check under the hood, get out of the car and watch him or her to be certain nothing is being done to make it appear that you need a part or work that is in fact unnecessary.

WHEELS AND TIRES

When you check your tire pressure, take a look at the tread on your tires. Uneven wear may mean that your vehicle has an alignment problem. If there is a serious alignment problem, you may feel your car pulling to the left or right. Remember to rotate your tires regularly, to promote even wear and long life. Buying new tires when needed may save you from fixing an inconvenient flat tire. Well-defined treads reduce the risk of skidding on wet pavement.

Be sure you have checked the pressure in your tires before going on a trip, and don't forget the spare.

BELTS

Be sure you know where your fan belt, power-steering belt, and alternator belt are located and check them for slippage or breakage. Learn where the air conditioning unit is located. This unit will also have a belt. Be sure belts are under tension and there are no signs of cracks, peeling, splitting or glazing. Similarly, any cracks, bulges or softness in your hoses are a sign of impending trouble.

BRAKES

If your brake pedal goes more than halfway to the floor, your brakes may need adjusting. Additionally, you may have brake problems if you feel your car pulling to the right or to the left when you stop.

EMERGENCY TOOLS

In addition to the jack and the car manual, it would be wise to have an emergency kit that includes safety flares, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, duct tape (which is helpful in repairing hoses) and an extra quart of oil. If you would like to increase your level of preparedness, it would be useful to carry simple, yet effective tools such as a screwdriver and wrench. It also would be prudent to carry a one-gallon gasoline can. And finally, a bottle of water is often useful, if not for yourself, for the radiator if it overheats on a hot day.

DANGER SIGNS

If the alternator light comes on, drive to the nearest service station. If the oil pressure light comes on, pull off the road and stop. Most likely your oil level is low, and driving without oil will permanently damage the engine. Having the oil changed on a regular basis as well as following your manual's recommended maintenance guide, will help assure safer auto travel as well as a longer life for your car.

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